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C O N F I D E N T I A L RABAT 001873

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STATE FOR NEA/MAG AND DRL NESCA
AID/W FOR DCH A/G

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [EAID](#) [PHUM](#) [UNSC](#) [MO](#)
SUBJECT: WESTERN SAHARA: THINKING ABOUT AUTONOMY AND
TRANSITION

Classified By: CDA Robert P. Jackson for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary:

¶1. (C) In the course of several visits to Western Sahara and conversations with contacts in Rabat, we have sensed the beginnings of a sometimes reluctant willingness by some pro-separatists, including human rights activists, to entertain the idea of autonomy rather than independence. Most Sahrawi interlocutors expressed a desire to run their own affairs free from intimidation. They are also focused on economic and social issues like unemployment. Reflecting developments in Morocco, civil society has flourished in recent years, nurtured by the Government. While mostly pro-Morocco, it includes pro-independence elements. Many civil society interlocutors, on both sides, requested capacity and mediation training, saying it would be an important part of implementing any settlement. We believe that, in preparation for a potential autonomous entity, the USG may wish to consider an exception to the restriction on aid to the territory to permit civil society development and capacity building assistance. End Summary.

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A Grudging and Cautious Convergence on Autonomy
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¶2. (C) During several recent visits to Western Sahara we heard some ardently separatist interlocutors speak of wanting to live in a territory where the government respected their rights and applied its laws fairly. The implicit acceptance of the prospect of some form of Moroccan sovereignty in the territory marked a subtle change from the usual "independence or nothing" line. Aminatou Haidar, a prominent separatist human rights activist, wondered whether Moroccan troops would leave the territory quickly and peacefully if an agreement were signed under either outcome. Some local Moroccan government officials spoke of wanting to resolve differences on the ground through negotiation and compromise, suggesting a softening of previously tough Government of Morocco (GOM) stances.

Training for Transition

¶3. (C) The majority of NGO and civil society (and even some government) interlocutors in Laayoune said they were

desperate for training and capacity building assistance. Almost to a person, regardless of political affiliation, they said that strong civil society organizations (CSOs) will be necessary to help Western Sahara make a peaceful transition to whatever status the parties agree on in U.N. negotiations.

Abdellah Hirsch, NGO member and pro-Moroccan Sahrawi, told us the U.S. should not wait until the territory's status is resolved to provide training to CSOs. "If you wait until then, it will be too late and you could risk disorder." Mohammed Cherkaoui, director of the newly opened Consultative Council on Human Rights (CCDH) office in Laayoune, asked how the USG and international community could be serious about resolving the territorial issue if they were not willing to "work on the ground in Laayoune and Tindouf" as well as at the table at the UN.

¶4. (C) Cherkaoui and the head of another NGO in Laayoune visited the Embassy on November 30 to present a proposal for track two dialogue amongst Sahrawis in the POLISARIO controlled camps, the territory, and the Sahrawi diaspora. They described a non-partisan process and framework within which participants, specifically youth, could discuss contentious issues. They said the project's goal was not to advocate for or against any particular proposal but to begin building non-governmental channels of conflict resolution and trust building to ease transition to whatever territorial status is arrived at through political negotiation.

Comment:

¶5. (C) The Government and civil society (both separatist and unionist) appear to be at an important stage in their social evolution where, for the first time, they are reaching out to each other - but blindly. The pro-independence activists have difficulty trusting the government's overtures, and officials' proffered olive branches are not being met with open arms. Washington may wish to consider modifying the policy restricting assistance to Western Sahara to permit support to cadre and civil society, at least in the area of capacity building and mediation training. Ensuring a viable NGO sector with established, open and constructive lines of communication with the local authorities will be a key part of facilitating the territory's movement towards autonomy. End Comment.

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Jackson